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# Presidential point man for Contras

By Diana West  
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**W**hen Elliott Abrams was an undergrad at Harvard, he and his roommate used to fight about the Vietnam War.

"We used to fight about it all the time," recalls former roommate Dan Hastings, "because I was for it, and he was against it."

Elliott Abrams? Lightning rod of liberal wrath, lodestar of conservative foreign policy, the persuasive point man for Ronald Reagan's Central American strategy, was against the Vietnam War?

"Don't get me wrong," adds Mr. Hastings, now a lawyer in New York. "He was never a radical." He pauses. "I'm just glad someone with that much ability became a conservative."

But not so fast.

A left-leaning twist of a smile appears on Elliott Abrams' face as he sits on a sofa in his sunny State Department office.

"Do you know I was the National Chairman of the Campus ADA [Americans for Democratic Action]? Following in the footsteps of Ronald Reagan himself?" he adds, finding wry pleasure in his words.

That was 1968, "an interesting period," recalls Mr. Abrams, 38, dressed in his Saturday best — khakis and sneakers and athletic socks fallen about his ankles.

"You have this split: Johnson was president, you have this thing about the war, and you have Humphrey. Now, I was for Humphrey, but I was sort of dis-elected because ADA was backing McCarthy."

"That was when ADA really made its turn left, and that was the beginning of the split in the Democratic Party. Ultimately," he explains, looking out from under bushy eyebrows, "you had McGovern in '72 and the formulation of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority."

(Rattling off a list of the early members of CDM, a group designed to regain control of the Democratic Party for centrists, Mr. Abrams mentions Jeane Kirkpatrick, Ben Wattenberg, the late Sen. Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson, and Reps. Jim Wright and Tom Foley — neatly omitting his own mother- and father-in-law, Midge Decter and Norman Podhoretz, founding members of CDM.)

In 1969, the Great Student Strike swept the Harvard campus, as the SDS occupied University Hall and attempted to shut down the campus by persuading people not to go to class.

"The experience of the student revolt affected him," says Mr. Hastings. "In my judgment, it moved him to the right."

So Elliott Abrams became one of the founders of The Ad Hoc Committee to Keep Harvard Open. "I still have the button that says, 'Keep Harvard Open,'" says Mr. Abrams. "We opposed the strike, but we had lots of fun. So I've been a counterrevolutionary for a long time."

And since last July, when he was named assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, Mr. Abrams has become the most visible advocate of the Reagan administration's endeavor to counter the spread of Marxism-Leninism throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, recently emerging as the leading spokesman for the administration's effort to give \$100 million in economic and military aid to the rebels, known as Contras, who are resisting Sandinista rule in Nicaragua.

"One of the reasons for a distinctly more aggressive policy in Central America is the replacement of Tony Motley with Elliott Abrams," says Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy Richard N. Perle. With the support of the administration's key officials — support his predecessors did not have — Mr. Abrams has actually revamped the State Department's role in formulating the administration's Central American policies.

Mr. Perle first met Mr. Abrams more than 15 years ago. As an employee of Henry M. Jackson's Senate office, Mr. Perle attended an ADA convention in Washington. "I think I gave a talk," he recalls, "and I met this really quite remarkable young Harvard student-delegate who didn't sound at all like the others, expressing Jackson views."

"I went back to the office and told Scoop I had met this remarkable fellow, liberal on domestic issues but quite outspoken and tough on the Soviets."

"Richard Perle introduced me to Scoop in 1971," says Mr. Abrams, "and when I was in law school [at Harvard], I went to work for him as a volunteer in the '72 campaign. And I said to him at the time, 'If you run in '76, I want to work for you.'"

But first, a stint as a lawyer in New York. "I didn't like it at all," Mr. Abrams says. "So on my birthday in 1975, I decided that this is the year I should work for Scoop. I came down here — it's fairly typical — intending that if he didn't get elected president, I'd go back to New York. But by then, it was too late."

"When Pat [Moynihan, New York Democrat] got elected to the Senate, he hired me. I was with him 2½ years, until June 1979," as special counsel and later chief of staff. "Then I went back to law practice for about a year-and-a-half."

Rachel Abrams, his wife of six years, says she knew her husband would "eventually get back into politics."

"He was bored with law, demoralized. Among his many talents," she explains with wifely pride, speaking over the background sounds of their three young children, "is his ability to read and absorb material very,

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